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**BETWEEN 'SILLY NOVELS' AND VEGETATION MYTHS: GEORGE
ELIOT'S SUBVERSIVE USE OF THE TWO SUITORS CONVENTION IN
*MIDDLEMARCH***

By Anna Gutowska

Take a woman's head, stuff it with a smattering of philosophy and literature chopped small, and with false notions of society baked hard, let it hang over a desk a few hours every day, and serve up hot in feeble English, when not required. (Eliot 1992:305)

'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', George Eliot's vitriolic overview of popular novels of the 1850s, which is the source of the mock-recipe above, was published in 1856, shortly before Eliot started writing her first work of fiction, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton'. More than ten years then passed before she began work on *Middlemarch*, her fifth novel, so it would certainly be far-fetched to assume that there is a direct connection between the opinions she voiced in 'Silly Novels' and the composition of *Middlemarch*. However, in my essay I am going to argue that the plot of George Eliot's masterpiece can in fact be seen as a reaction against stereotypical novelistic plot devices which she had ridiculed in her *Westminster Review* essay.

Specifically, I would like to suggest that Dorothea's story in *Middlemarch* can be read as a subversive version of the Austenian romance, a type of novel where the plot focuses on the heroine's quest for a happy marriage. In a classic Austenian romance, the heroine interacts with eligible men (typically, there are two principal suitors, hence this formula is also called 'the two suitors convention'). One of the suitors is finally revealed to be the heroine's true mate. In the novel's dénouement, the protagonist's principal rival is usually revealed to be in some way flawed and not worthy of the heroine. The Austenian romance is not unlike a detective story in that the plot is determined by the need to control the reader's expectations, and to achieve an ending which will be both satisfactory and surprising. Jean E. Kennard thus succinctly summarizes the main features of this sub-genre of romance:

[Austen] adapted the formula of the female quixotic novel in which a young girl learns to abandon a view of the world based on fantasy and to adjust herself to reality. [...] Jane Austen incorporates within this basic structure the characters from the novel of sensibility and uses two of them in particular, the unscrupulous or "wrong" suitor and the "right" suitor, as touchstones of value in her heroine's progress towards maturity. [...] The growth of the heroine in a Jane Austen novel is marked by her choice of the "right" suitor over the "wrong" suitor. The "wrong" suitor represents the qualities which the heroine must reject; the "right" suitor those which, in Jane Austen's view, make for a good life. [...] The convention is often more subtly used than my statements suggest [...] but the skeleton is invariably the same and remains the same in a great number of nineteenth-century novels which take the development of a woman as their central subject. (Kennard 1973: 24)

Even a cursory comparison of the above blueprint and of Dorothea's story reveals many important similarities. But I would also like to suggest that, apart from Jane Austen's novels, the popular novels of the mid-nineteenth century constitute another important (albeit subversive) source of inspiration for *Middlemarch*. A similar point is made by Susan Rowland Tush in *George Eliot and the Conventions of Popular Women's Fiction*. The critic argues that

it is possible to analyse the plot of *Middlemarch* in the context of specific popular novels reviewed by Eliot in 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' and comes to the conclusion that Dorothea's story is meant as a direct rebuttal of escapist fantasies found in 'silly novels', and especially of the unrealistic heroines.

In the opening section of 'Silly Novels', George Eliot offers a sarcastic portrayal of such a standard heroine:

Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues. [...] In her recorded conversations she is amazingly eloquent, and in her unrecorded conversations, amazingly witty. She is understood to have a depth of insight that looks through and through the shallow theories of philosophers[...]. The men play a very subordinate part by her side. [...] They see her at a ball, and they are dazzled; at a flower-show, and they are fascinated; on a riding excursion, and they are witched by her noble horsemanship; at church, and they are awed by the sweet solemnity of her demeanour. (Eliot 1992: 296)

In what seems to be an ironic acknowledgement of this novelistic tradition, the opening chapter of *Middlemarch* features a detailed description of Dorothea's physical appearance, which highlights her 'finely formed hand and wrist', her dignified profile and stature, her 'remarkable cleverness' and her disdain of finery and ostentation. As if to make this picture of Dorothea's perfection complete, we also learn that she is an accomplished horsewoman (and, in a subtly ironic twist, she immediately announces her decision to give up horse riding). It is as if the author counted on her readers, well schooled in novelistic conventions, to assume that the beautiful girl from the opening chapter will turn out to be the heroine of the novel. It is not until Chapter IX that the novel's focus shifts to Lydgate and the readers realize that Dorothea's journey is not going to constitute the main plot, but rather one of the two parallel and interweaving main subplots. Much later, George Eliot even more clearly signals her impatience with the heroine-centred novels in the famous opening passage of Chapter XXIX:

One morning some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungred like the rest of us. (261)

The narrator's plea for sympathy for the husband is morally and psychologically poignant. But apart from its merit, it is also possible to see it as a reaction against the tradition of the heroine-centred 'silly novel'.

As Susan Tush aptly remarks, in Eliot's typology of 'silly novels', the type to which Dorothea's story in *Middlemarch* refers is the 'mind and millinery' novel, whose heroine is 'the ideal woman in feelings, faculties and flounces [...] perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious' (Eliot 1992: 296). The portrayal of Dorothea can be seen as an attempt to create a more realistic and psychologically truthful picture of a young woman. But even more

fundamentally, George Eliot shows that a novel does not need to focus on courtship between the perfect heroine and the attractive hero, but can also give equal attention (and compassion) to other characters, who in a lesser novel would be mere stereotypes.

It should be noted that George Eliot had employed the two suitors convention before in a very straightforward manner in *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), but its deployment in *Middlemarch* is much more subversive and experimental. Whereas Jane Austen's novels or Eliot's own *Felix Holt* do not contain any supernumerary characters who could be construed as possible 'right' suitors, the complex plot of *Middlemarch* abounds with such possibilities. The respective positions of the male characters shift perceptibly in the course of the novel. In the introductory chapters, Mr Casaubon is pitted against Sir James Chettam – and it is the kind but unimaginative Chettam who, in spite of all his efforts to please Dorothea, comes through as the wrong suitor. At this point, Dorothea is firmly convinced that 'the really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it' (10) and so she chooses Casaubon who seems to fulfil this requirement. It should be stressed that the portrayal of Dorothea in the initial chapters is consistently (if subtly) ironic. She is ardent and well-meaning, but suffers from quixotic illusions: she ineffectively dreams about building cottages for the poor, but her incompetent drawings of them usually contain 'incompatible stairs and fireplaces' (14). In a bout of inspired irony on Eliot's part, she is also discomfited to discover that Casaubon's tenants live in relative prosperity and so will not require her assistance. In accordance with the convention of the 'female quixotic novel', Dorothea will be called on to reassess many of her notions and will realize that she had made a mistake in her choice of a husband. Casaubon, now relegated to the position of the wrong (though successful) suitor, will after the wedding be pitted against his polar opposite, the young and energetic Ladislaw.

In terms of the Austenian romance, the compassionate portrayal of the 'wrong suitor' in *Middlemarch*, first signalled by the impatient exclamation 'Why always Dorothea?', is decidedly unorthodox. George Eliot consistently presents Casaubon not so much as a villain, but as a victim. Both he and Dorothea enter the marriage based on misconceptions, and the result is bitter unhappiness and disillusion. The more recent critical approaches to *Middlemarch* are particularly eager to vindicate Casaubon, but the potential for a sympathetic, rather than hostile, view of the character is undeniably present in the novel itself. The shift of opinion regarding him is usually accompanied by a more negative evaluation of Dorothea. Nina Auerbach's intensely personal essay 'Dorothea's Lost Dog' best illustrates this recent tendency:

I admit to a quirky bias against this floridly self-mortifying girl [...]. Because reading and writing are the heart of my life, as they were of George Eliot's, I have always identified with Casaubon. Personal disclosure: I hate people asking dulcetly when my book will be finished, as Dorothea does incessantly. I find Dorothea's well-intentioned probing particularly grating, because she, quite picturesquely, never reads [...]. Marriage to a scholar, even an amateur one, teaches her only to disdain scholarship as lightly as Rosamond disdains Lydgate's pattering around with corpses. (Auerbach 2006: 91-92)

Auerbach's negative opinion of Dorothea has little textual foundation and the critic herself readily admits that it is deeply idiosyncratic. But even if Auerbach's hostile reading of Dorothea seems far-fetched, her vindication of Casaubon appears nonetheless valid and based

on a sound textual basis, even if the clues to his real value are skilfully concealed by Eliot.

As A. D. Nuttall persuasively argues in *Dead from the Waist Down* (2003), the popular perception of Casaubon as ‘the desiccated walking corpse to whom the starry-eyed heroine is married’ (Nuttall 2003: 26) is a gross misconception. The portrayal of Casaubon is decidedly more nuanced, but Eliot’s authorial judgement on the character tends to be elusive due to the opaque nature of scientific imagery used to characterize him. In essence, Nuttall maintains, the reader should be familiar with nineteenth century scientific theories in order to properly appreciate the portrayal of Casaubon, as the character is completely defined by his scholarship. We learn early in the novel that he is engaged in writing an all-encompassing historical account of the world’s religions entitled *The Key to all Mythologies*. From his rather vague descriptions of this project, it appears that the concept of his work is similar to that of *The Golden Bough* (1890). Like Frazer’s seminal work, *The Key to All Mythologies* was not going to be a mere reference book, an encyclopaedia of forgotten gods. Casaubon endeavours to explain the common elements underlying all human religions – as he tells Dorothea, he aims to show that ‘all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed’ (22). This is one of the more perplexing aporias in *Middlemarch* – if Casaubon is as dry and boring as Eliot at times seems to imply, how has he even conceived the idea of writing such a book? His task is truly gigantic and might well prove to be beyond his physical and intellectual capacities. Still, one cannot help but feel that the sheer vastness of the idea in a way redeems the character.

George Eliot’s biographers stress that she pointed out to her friends that Casaubon’s ‘hours of uncreative business’ (220) are modelled on her own writing experience (Rignall – 2001: 53). On the other hand, she clearly did not endow Casaubon with her own formidable – intellectual powers. Casaubon’s weak eyesight is often alluded to, and his ‘dim-sightedness’ (263) is more than just a physical condition. He is not able to grasp his immense subject synthetically, and, poignantly, only seems to move closer to finally writing the book on the last night of his life. The readers are left in ignorance as to the details of Casaubon’s ‘grand design’, but the narrator tells us that it is deeply flawed. The attack on *The Key to all Mythologies* is focalized first through Ladislav in his conversation with Dorothea in Rome, where he accuses Casaubon of ‘deafness to what is being done by the rest of the world’ (194), especially by German scholars. And, more crucially, Dorothea fears that promising her husband to take over his work after his death will in fact be

sorting what might be called shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins – sorting them as foison for a theory which was already withered in the birth like an elfin child. (450)

The recurring imagery of death and decay surrounding Casaubon, of which the passage above is an illustration, imbues the character with tragic pathos. But it also serves an important function within the complex ‘two suitors’ pattern of *Middlemarch*, helping to establish a strong contrast between Casaubon and Will Ladislav.

The pattern of opposition of the two suitors in Austen’s novels or George Eliot’s own *Felix Holt* is quite straightforward. In *Middlemarch*, however, the differences between the two principal suitors are not a simple matter of contrasting social classes or levels of wealth. The contrast between Casaubon and Ladislav is more fundamental, though somewhat opaque. In her analysis of the mythical dimension of *Middlemarch*, Felicia Bonaparte persuasively argues

that certain parts of the novel can be treated as a modern re-enactment of a vegetation myth (Bonaparte 1975: 41). *Middlemarch* opens in late autumn and the closing scenes are set in the spring. Thus, the cycle of the seasons becomes a valid context for Dorothea's story.

Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending', says Eliot in the Finale, emphasizing the circularity of time in the novel. Within the paradigm of the vegetation myth, Dorothea's two husbands, Casaubon and Ladislaw, can be construed as polar opposites. Casaubon stands for the god of the Underworld and death, whereas Will, through his association with art and light, becomes a figure of Apollo (or arguably of Orpheus, who in some versions of the myth is Apollo's son). Ladislaw's physical characterization makes him also seem a latter-day romantic hero, a figure vaguely perceived by the Middlemarch community as revolutionary and possibly disruptive. An important clue comes from the seemingly inconsequential Mr Brooke, who calls Ladislaw 'a kind of Shelley' (227). Much earlier in the novel, the outspoken Mrs Cadwallader also calls him 'a sort of Byronic hero' and 'an amorous conspirator' (357). Felicia Bonaparte suggests yet another useful context for interpreting Ladislaw by maintaining that the character's name refers to Saint Ladislaus, the patron of chivalry (Rignall 2001:138). Ladislaw's story arc in the novel thus becomes a chivalric quest whose objective is rescuing the maiden from the thrall of an evil sorcerer. The death-like imagery that permeates the characterization of Casaubon and Lowick Manor effectively reinforces this image. The dichotomic characterization of Ladislaw and Casaubon makes it clear that the two characters stand for one of the most primeval contrasts, that of youth and age, life and death.

The imagery surrounding Mr Casaubon is consistently connected with winter, old age and death. It is no coincidence that Dorothea first visits her fiancé's home on a 'grey but dry November morning'. Incidentally, the visit to her prospective husband's home, apart from establishing the association of Mr Casaubon with winter and cold, serves another important function. Within the Austenian paradigm, the heroine's visit to the hero's home is a staple plot point (cf. Kennard 1978: 31-2). There is a well established tradition of a metonymical relationship between the suitor and his house: a seminal example is Elizabeth Bennet's visit to Darcy's stately home in *Pride and Prejudice*, which constitutes an important step in her journey of emotional self-discovery. George Eliot's version of this virtually obligatory plot element includes a telling twist – contrary to the convention, Dorothea visits the house of the wrong – and not the right – suitor. In yet another twist, the right suitor is also present in the background, for it is during this visit to Lowick that Dorothea first meets Ladislaw. His characterization is in sharp opposition to the imagery of old age and coldness persistent in this chapter. Celia, who first spots Ladislaw, repeatedly dwells on his youth (70), and when Dorothea and her party first meet him, the narrator goes out of her way to assure the reader that Ladislaw should be associated with vegetation – and by extension also with spring – by stressing that even in the midst of November 'he is conspicuous on a dark background of evergreens' (72).

In contrast, Casaubon's withered look is commented on by many characters. It constitutes in fact the core of the objections against Dorothea's marrying him. Celia indignantly talks about his 'ugliness' and 'deep eye sockets' (19) and Dorothea's rejected suitor, Sir James Chettam, calls Casaubon 'a dried bookworm' (21) and 'a mummy' (54). Meanwhile, Mr Casaubon is not yet fifty years old. He is not really senile, even though he appears so to Celia and Chettam, and his intention to marry a girl half his age is not so extraordinary by Victorian standards. For all this, there is a special wintry air about Mr Casaubon – conveyed not only through the remarks of other characters, but also through the narrator's voice. During

his courtship, Mr Casaubon smiles resemble 'a pale wintry sunshine' (24) and he himself is surprised with the lukewarmness of his own feelings for Dorothea and concludes that 'the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion' (58).

Casaubon's proposal letter, in which he boasts that he can offer his bride 'an affection hitherto unwasted' (40) further reinforces his arid image. As A. D. Nuttall wryly observes, 'the icy chastity that Mr Casaubon thinks will commend him, in the new value-system effectively ruins him' (Nuttall 2003: 48). As I demonstrated above, Casaubon's sexlessness is paired with intellectual sterility, and even his choice of academic discipline emphasizes the deathlike qualities of the character – he is concerned with the study of dead religions and extinct languages. In an additional ironic twist, if we accept Casaubon's identification with the god of the Underworld, it becomes clear that he is unwittingly living as if 'inside' his own book. His marriage to Dorothea and jealousy of Ladislav are a re-enactment of a primeval mythical pattern. It should also be remarked that the scene in which Dorothea agrees to marry Ladislav can be seen on a symbolic level as her rescue from the Underworld by Ladislav/Orpheus.

The mythical paradigm of Dorothea's part of the novel is inextricably connected with the underlying Austenian formula. Will Ladislav becomes Casaubon's obvious rival – and also his binary opposite, as he is surrounded with recurring imagery of spring, youth and sunshine. There are, however, several blatant departures from the formula. The fact that Dorothea is allowed to marry the wrong suitor is certainly unorthodox. Still, as C. N. Smith puts it in his analysis of suspense in the works of nineteenth century novelists, in mid- and late Victorian deployments of the formula 'it was deemed possible that the hero and heroine should be able to love more than one person, without compromising their integrity or ability to settle down to a happy lifelong marriage' (Smith 1982: 85). Eliot herself in 'Silly Novels', also noted this fact:

For all this, [the heroine] as often as not marries the wrong person to begin with, and she suffers terribly, [...] but even death has a soft place in his heart for such a paragon, and remedies all mistakes for her just at the right moment. [...] The tedious husband dies in his bed requesting his wife, as a particular favour to him, to marry the man she loves best, and having already dispatched a note to the lover informing him of the comfortable arrangement. (Eliot 1992: 297)

It seems evident that the death of Casaubon constitutes an ironic reversal of this formula. The passage from 'Silly Novels' demonstrates Eliot's awareness of – and impatience with – the literary convention of the husband's dying wish.

At first glance, the situation presented in *Middlemarch* bears little resemblance to the formulaic behaviour of 'the tedious husband'. Mr Casaubon dies without actually voicing his wishes – and because he dies suddenly in his garden, there is no actual deathbed scene. However, the conversation with Dorothea on the night preceding his death serves practically the function of a deathbed scene. Dorothea (and the readers) naturally assume that Casaubon is going to ask her to edit his notes and publish *The Key to All Mythologies*. But when the truth about the codicil to his will is slowly revealed, we learn that his dying request is in fact a mirror opposite of the behaviour of a 'tedious husband' from a 'silly novel' – he expressly forbids Dorothea to marry Ladislav. In yet another ironic twist, one could argue that, if it were not for Casaubon's insulting codicil, Dorothea would perhaps never understand her feelings for Ladislav, and thus his dying wish actually brought about the outcome that he had most feared (but that, paradoxically, is in essence identical with a standard happy ending of a 'silly novel')

– the heroine is finally allowed to marry ‘the man she loves best’.)

The situation is made more complex however as Dorothea’s final marriage to Ladislaw thwarts another possibility that, structurally and morally, seems to be the perfect conclusion of the novel. This unrealized ending, which Barbara Hardy calls ‘the chief unacted possibility’ (Hardy 1986:143), is the union of Dorothea and Lydgate. On first reading, it seems reasonable to expect that the two most interesting and likeable characters, and the respective protagonists of the ‘small town’ and ‘county’ halves of the novel, will eventually marry. The intricate plotting of mainstream Victorian novels, especially Dickens’s and Collins’s, taught the readers to expect that the seemingly disparate plotlines would serendipitously merge. Even the fact that Dorothea and Lydgate form other ties does not extinguish these expectations completely, as in mid-nineteenth-century deployments of the Austenian formula remarriage was no longer out of the question. Dorothea and Lydgate are perfectly compatible to one another – her ambition is to be a helpmate to a great man, and Lydgate has the potential for scientific greatness and is in need of financial stability that such a marriage would bring.

Though there is much proof in the early reviews, such as R. H. Hutton’s review in the *Spectator* of 1 June, 1872 (Carroll 1971: 286-314), that the marriage of Dorothea and Lydgate was the confidently expected outcome, George Eliot did not leave any hints about her intentions and, consequently, it is impossible to know for certain whether she was aware of the readers’ expectations. But textual evidence makes it probable that Eliot foresaw the possibility of playing with the readers’ expectations regarding the marriage of Dorothea and Lydgate. The description of their first meeting tantalizingly indicates that at the moment Lydgate is not attracted to Dorothea and prefers Rosamond.

Certainly nothing at present could seem much less important to Lydgate than the turn of Miss Brooke’s mind, or to Miss Brooke than the qualities of the woman who had attracted this young surgeon. But anyone watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unIntroduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand. (88)

The seemingly unobtrusive ‘at present’ can be treated as proleptic by seasoned novel readers, who might assume that initial lack of interest, or even actual dislike, between the heroine and the hero are not prohibitive of their eventual union. Thus, the ‘at present’ brings a promise that is manifestly false, as Dorothea and Lydgate will not marry, but at the same time to some degree valid, because in the course of the novel the two characters will grow to respect and trust one another. Perhaps influenced by the expectations voiced in reviews of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot used the same pattern to much greater effect also in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), making the ambiguous and unfulfilled relationship between Gwendolen and Daniel, the crux of the novel. Finally, it is important to notice that all romantic complications in *Middlemarch* are based on reiterations and variations of the two suitors formula. Apart from Dorothea and her initial wrong choice between the two suitors, there is Rosamond Vincy, who likewise chooses Lydgate over Ned Plymdale for all the wrong reasons and grows to regret it – and also later comes to feel that Ladislaw would be a better husband for her than Lydgate; and Mary Garth, who chooses Rosamond’s brother, Fred, over Mr Farebrother. All these courtships and marriages serve as foils to one another, and the psychological insight and detail with which

they are presented is a subtle refutation of the excessive concentration on the heroine, which George Eliot had found so offensive in 'Silly Novels'. Apart from its usefulness in subverting readers' expectations, the breach with the tradition of heroine-centred novel also has philosophical and moral ramifications. Gillian Beer insists that the main theme of *Middlemarch* is 'seeking out ways beyond single consciousness and creating a sense of inclusiveness and extension' (Beer 1986:172). Viewed in this light, the impatient exclamation: "Why always Dorothea?" and the subsequent turn to analyze the workings of Casaubon's mind in Chapter XXIX become important clues that illuminate George Eliot's overall concept for *Middlemarch*.

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